

The politics of the Augustan building programme

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'I found Rome built of brick and left it made of marble' was the proud boast of the Emperor Augustus. From about 28 B.C., Augustus embarked on a hugely ambitious building programme that changed the face of Rome and much of the Empire. At the same time, he established his own power and attempted to secure the succession of his own dynasty while the liberties of the Republic were eroded and the constitution undermined. These two accomplishments may well have been connected.

To understand the background to Augustus' building activities, we must first look at the political climate and events that surrounded his rise to power. After the assassination of Julius Caesar in March 44 B.C., Rome experienced several years of political unrest in which Caesar's named heir, his nephew Octavian (later to become Augustus) fought off a number of factions seeking to gain power in Rome. His last rival, Mark Anthony who had established his court with Cleopatra in Egypt, was defeated by Octavian at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C.. This event brought to an end the civil wars that had torn Rome apart. Octavian was hailed as the defender of Rome against the East and in 27 B.C. became *princeps* (first citizen), took the name of Augustus and dedicated himself to restoring the Republic. However, over the next 40 years, Augustus cleverly subverted the constitution and established an imperial dynasty.

Augustus soon realised that architecture was a powerful propaganda weapon. It was vital that he restored stability to Rome as quickly as possible, so he promoted his own image and position to the people of Rome as the valid heir of Julius Caesar and the founder of a new golden age – but one based on traditional Roman values and ideals. Augustus set about justifying his position in the building of public monuments such as the Forum of Augustus. Completed in 2 B.C., it contained a statue of Augustus along with those of the kings of Alba Longa, Aeneas and Romulus, showing the descent of Caesar's family from these legendary founders of Rome; Caesar had claimed he was descended from Venus, mother of Aeneas. Thus Augustus asserted his right as the successor of Rome's ancient rulers.

Marble arch

The forum had a military theme and was dominated by the temple of Mars Ultor. Its lofty columns, architectural decoration of shields embossed with different deities, and huge collection of weapons captured by Roman soldiers, were intended to reflect the extent of Roman military success and the glory of Augustus' rule. The forum itself was covered in veneers of coloured marble brought in from many parts of the empire, demonstrating Roman domination over the Mediterranean.

A more mixed message was conveyed by the construction of Augustus' Mausoleum at about the same time as the *Saepta* (or voting place for the people) was extended and richly decorated. The former was intended to glorify Augustus and his family, while the latter drew attention to the supposed power of the people. (In reality, the people were less and less permitted to vote.)

Popular

In order to maintain the stability of the state, Augustus needed a happy and quiescent people. If discontented, the plebs could cause serious disturbances and threaten the state. They had much to be discontented about. The poor mainly lived in badly built wooden blocks of flats with very cramped conditions and no running water or sanitation. So Augustus commissioned the first ever public baths to be built on the west side of the Campus Martius and also several theatres for public entertainment, the most famous of which were the theatre of Marcellus and the theatre of the Younger Balbus.

This strategy of distraction was extraordinarily successful. The people greeted his presence enthusiastically, appearing to accept him as the leader of the new order. But were they aware of Augustus' motives? The theatres were carefully constructed to promote a system of social classification. Passageways and staircases separated the audience according to rank, which served to impress upon the people the new social order. The building programmes also provided employment, not just for masons and carpenters, but for unskilled labourers, which helped keep them occupied, fed and contented, and stimulated the economy. The restoration of peace and prosperity after years of civil war was probably Augustus' greatest achievement.

The terrible civil wars were thought to have resulted from a complete moral collapse in Rome. Augustus had, therefore, to prove not only that he was concerned with securing his own power, but also that he could rebuild Roman society and redress its serious moral decline. He saw the restoration of religion to its central position in Roman life as vital to improving Rome's moral standards as neglect of the gods had been partly blamed for Rome's dire situation. As the poet Horace wrote at the time, 'Roman, you may be innocent ... yet you shall pay for each ancestral crime, until our mouldering temples are rebuilt and the gods' statues cleansed of smoke and grime'. Augustus restored eighty-two temples in one year alone (28 B.C.) as he himself boasted in his *Res Gestae*, or 'record of his achievements'. The hope was that with the renewal of religion and the restoration of the old deities of Rome, he would associate himself with the traditional values: confidence in divine providence, duty to the fatherland and a sense of order and permanence.

Monument

The most impressive and powerful moralising monument of Augustus, however, was the Altar of Augustan Peace, or Ara Pacis. Built between 13 and 9 B.C. (supposedly on the order of the Senate, as a thank-offering for Augustus' safe return from Spain and Gaul), it was a masterpiece of both architecture and propaganda. The altar's frieze depicted the consecration ceremony, with the figures of Augustus and the imperial family, and also traditional sacrificial images of bulls' skulls and garlands. The frieze is very similar to that of the Parthenon, but whereas people are segregated by sex on the Parthenon, they are in family

groups on the Ara Pacis, reflecting Augustus' promotion of marriage and child-bearing. The depiction of children clutching their parents' robes reinforced this message and symbolised the hopes of peace and prosperity promised by Augustus. Among the sacred objects shown were parts of a ship (a reference to the naval battle of Actium) and the busts of certain gods; these indicated that the victory allotted to Augustus resulted from his respect for the gods. Augustus was also shown performing a sacrifice, as also was Aeneas portrayed performing the same rite as he first set foot in Italy. Perhaps Augustus is being connected directly with Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The Ara Pacis was a brilliant piece of political propaganda intended to capture the hearts and minds of the Roman people, and represent the spirit of the new age.

Whopping

The buildings of Augustus did indeed reflect the events of his rule. The Empire continued to expand and Rome had to live up to its position as the great centre of a colossal empire. What better way to do this than to impress the foreign visitor with stunning public buildings, monuments and triumphal arches adorned with gold and marble with carvings by the most skilled craftsmen from across the empire. The poet Ovid sums this up: 'there was a rude simplicity before, now Rome has turned to gold, for she possesses the great treasures of a conquered world. In 20 B.C. Augustus erected a golden milestone in the Forum Romanum ('Forum of Rome') to symbolise the centre of the world from which all roads radiated out to the furthest corners of the empire. As well as using traditional building materials and styles, the Augustan period saw the development of architectural and building experiments begun in the later years of the Republic: improvements in the quality of concrete, developing the dome and using marble to face public buildings, which gave Rome a look of dignity and sophistication. However, the influence of traditional Greek models on Augustan architecture is also very apparent, both in the style of the temples and in the larger building projects such as the Forum of Augustus (which resembled sanctuaries built in Hellenistic royal cities), and the Ara Pacis on which many Greek craftsmen may have worked and whose frieze (as we have seen) echoed Pericles' Parthenon. Thus Augustus demonstrated not only Roman domination of the Greek world, but also continuity with the past.

Augustus also pioneered big building programmes in the provinces, realising that, with a growing empire, the power of Rome had to be impressed upon all its subject people. Triumphal arches were a common feature, and he encouraged city-foundations in the provinces to imitate the appearance of Rome. Augustus also established new towns in Gaul, the Iberian Peninsula and Yugoslavia, being determined to leave the stamp of Rome on Europe.

Swish cottage

The spectacular face of Rome in the Augustan age represented Augustus' own self-image. While immensely wealthy and powerful, he wanted to present his own living style as simple, so that the contrasting beauty of public buildings would be all the more impressive. His own house on the Palatine was small compared with the splendour of the rest of Rome and this philosophy seemed to endear him to its citizens.

The Augustan building programme certainly contributed to the myth of the golden age. But if the veneers of marble concealed an inner core of concrete, so too did this shining face of the restored Republic conceal an imperial regime in which the people – even those from the ruling class – had very little influence. Augustus exercised almost absolute power. Monuments such as the Ara Pacis depicted aspects of the Republican constitution which no longer existed in practice. Though technically

Augustus ruled by the consent of the Senate and people of Rome, all real power lay in the hands of Augustus himself. We should beware of grandiose building programmes. As Albert Speer's Berlin demonstrated the true nature of the Third Reich (see Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis' article in this issue), so perhaps the imposing architecture of Augustus suggests a man grasping for absolute power. The genius of Augustus, however, may have been to use these buildings to persuade the Roman people that, despite this, he embodied the simple virtues of the Republic, and only he could preserve peace and prosperity.

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For more on the monuments of Rome, see
<http://www.romeguide.it/MONUM/indexin.htm>